

MARK DUNCAN, PROFESSOR AT SAUMUR, 1606-1640

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I

THE early part of the life of Mark Duncan, who eventually achieved high repute at the Protestant Academy of Saumur, is veiled in obscurity. Born in Scotland, probably between 1570 and 1580, he was the son, or grandson, of Thomas Duncan and his wife Janet Oliphant, of Maxpoffle in Roxburghshire,¹ and presumably received his early education in Edinburgh or Stirling. From the fact that as a youth he became fluent in French, we may judge that he attended a Grammar School where in his boyhood French was specially taught. It is doubtful whether he completed his "humanities" in Scotland, as his name does not appear on the university register of St. Andrews, Glasgow or Edinburgh. He followed a frequent custom of his time, and, like other young Scots, went abroad for increased opportunities of learning and with eyes open for a post, which, in the latter part of the sixteenth century, was not easy to find at home.²

It will be recalled that at this particular period the champions of

¹ The following from Scott's *Fasti* appears to bear on more than one member of the family from which Mark Duncan sprang.

Thomas Duncan or Duncanson, probably son or grandson of Thomas D. of Maxpoffle, in the parish (of Bowden), & Janet Oliphant; presented to the vicarage by James VI., Jan. 10, 1567; admitted Feb. 2, 1568; presented to the parsonage of Lilliesleaf by the King, Nov. 22, 1571. In 1574, Lilliesleaf, Langnewton and Melrose were also under his care, with the help of two readers. He died Father of the Church in 1621. He married and had issue, Andrew, his successor.—*Reg. Assig.*

Andrew Duncanson, son of preceding, served heir to his father Dec. 5, 1629; admitted assistant and successor after Oct. 28, 1617; translated to St. Boswells, May 5, 1618.—*Inq. Ret. Roxburgh*, p. 144.

The relationship of these to Mark Duncan is not quite clear, but there is a tradition that Mark was (like Thomas the younger) the son or grandson of Thomas Duncan and Janet Oliphant. If "son" is correct rather than "grandson" in either case, there would arise a difficulty in adjusting the dates of the two. If each was a "grandson" and Mark and the younger Thomas were cousins, adjustment would be easier on grounds of probability. Dempster (*Hist. Scot.*) makes reference to a distinguished brother of Mark named William.

² Joseph Scaliger praised Duncan as coming from the *West* of Scotland which had produced Buchanan.—*Parnassus Euganeus*, P. VII (1647).

educational progress in Scotland were encountering specific obstacles, and that, on the other hand, there was a keen demand for teachers on the Continent after the wasting effects of the Wars of Religion, and notably so among the Protestants of France. These had to go far afield on many occasions to fill their depleted staffs. Such considerations may help to explain the exodus from Scotland of so many of the best brains of the country. We have only to look at the lists of the eight great French Protestant Academies of the period to see that in appealing to Scotland for scholarly workers they did not ask in vain.¹

We first definitely find Mark Duncan teaching Greek in 1606 at the Academy of Sedan. By its political independence Sedan had escaped from the tumult of the time. Catherine de Bouillon, a woman of an illustrious family—the Lords of Lamarck in the Duchy of Bouillon, descendants of the “Boar of Ardennes”²—was of the Reformed faith, and foundress of the college which blossomed forth into the Academy: it became a nursery of genius. The names of Tilenius, the Cappels (oriental scholars), Tremellius, and later the historian Pierre Bayle, bear witness to the fact that Sedan was a centre of high learning and culture. The Scottish Pleiad there embraced such celebrities as John Cameron (Philosophy, 1602-1604); Donaldson (Greek, 1610-1624); the Colvils (Greek, Hebrew); Adam Stewart (Philosophy, 1619-1625); William Johnstone, and the poet, Arthur Johnstone (the last two being Regents respectively in 1604 and 1610); and finally Andrew Melville, who held the Chair of Theology from 1611 and died there in 1622.³

Duncan's term of office at Sedan was probably brief, for in the year already mentioned, 1606, he moved to the Academy of Saumur. In 1599 Saumur had been opened by order of the Church, and further set on its way by royal letters patent as a “collège garni à trois langues.” Not only was it destined to rival Sedan, but it actually became synonymous with progress and liberal thinking. It owed much to the generosity and influence of the noble Philippe du Plessis-Mornay, scholar and diplomat, the friend of Henri IV (Henry of Navarre). Though Du Plessy-Mornay's backing may have helped to get Duncan to Saumur, yet the future Principal had to comply with the rules which ordinarily governed all nominations to professorial chairs. The appointments were made by the Council, which was composed of “worthies,” and they had to be satisfied that they had found the best possible candidate.⁴

¹ Bourchenin gives an approximate list of forty Scots professors in these Academies.—*Académies Protestantes*.

² Cf. Scott: *Quentin Durward, passim*.

³ P. Mellon: *Académie de Sedan*; Bourchenin: *Acad. Prot.*

⁴ The candidates for any chair had to deliver “trial” lectures on prescribed subjects—two before the Council, and two in public: and to hand in two theses besides, as well as credentials. The award was made on competitive grounds.—Célestin Port: *Dictionnaire du Maine-et-Loire*.

Duncan began his work in the Chair of Philosophy, but added the subject of Oratory in the following year. He was elected Principal in 1616, being the first to hold that office, which was created by a "sitting extraordinary" of the Council. It was a rule common to all Academies that the Principal should be "un homme sérieux, instruit, d'une réputation sans tache." Duncan had proved himself to have these qualifications and still more. The manifold obligations of the post are fully detailed in the statutes.¹ These emphasise the value of disciplinary powers, which were much needed at a time when the turbulence of students, even their savagery, was notorious. Duncan seems to have exercised his prerogatives to the full.² In the year 1627 he assumed, in addition to his other responsibilities, the duties of the Chair of Greek, which he held up to the year 1640. Meanwhile in 1630 the second Synod of Charenton, in view of financial stress, had abolished the Principalship as a salaried appointment, though Duncan still held it titularly, sharing it thus with E. Benoit.

We learn that several Scots were associated at this period with the Academy of Saumur. When Duncan came to it, Robert Boyd³ was already in the Chair of Theology, and from 1611 to 1615 Zachary Boyd⁴ was Regent of the second "Classe." Others less famous were Campbell, Professor of Rhetoric, 1626-1629, and Patricius Peblis, who held some appointment from 1634 to 1642. The brilliant John Cameron was called from his charge at Bordeaux to the Chair of Theology in 1618, and helped to pull the Academy up at a juncture when, in the words of Du Plessy-Mornay, it "s'en allait penchant." Saumur had two chairs of philosophy, and the teaching embraced Logic, Physics and Metaphysics. The Maitre de Philosophie was also from 1607 Maitre d'Eloquence. Each chair had a high status. Their teachers were singled out among their brethren as "leaders and heralds in the republic of letters."⁵

¹ *Registres*, I, 11.

² Duncan's second marriage was the pretext for some kind of "rag," of which some notice had to be taken because of its sinister nature. The "Classique" students received the birch; those of Philosophy were censured.—Goulay: *Souvenirs Anecdotiques sur Saumur*: Saumur, 1843.

³ Robert Boyd, of Trochrig, born in Glasgow, 1578, son of James Boyd, titular Archbishop of Glasgow. He was M.A. of Edinburgh; became a professor in Montauban Academy; was ordained to the ministry of the French Reformed Church at Verteuil; appointed Professor of Theology at Saumur, 1606; then pastor of the church there. In 1615, James I sent for him and appointed him Professor of Divinity and Principal of Glasgow University.—*Scottish Nation*, I, On Boyd's loyal stand for Presbyterianism, see Calderwood: *Hist.*, VII, 566-569.

⁴ Zachary Boyd, born 1590 (?); one of the Boyds of Pinkhill in Ayrshire; cousin of Robert Boyd. He was educated at Glasgow University; came to Saumur, 1607; remained fourteen years in France; returned to Scotland, 1621.—Neil: *Life of Zachary Boyd*; and *Scottish Nation*, I.

⁵ *Registres*; *Acad. de Saumur*.

II

Duncan's pen was prolific, and he wrote learnedly and, not without originality, on Ethics as well as on topics of a varied kind. But the main drift of his philosophical teaching is to be found in his Course on Logic in five books, the *Institutiones Logicae*. Its method is largely built on Aristotle. The language is correct and even polished Latin. What we may call the bones of Formal Logic he treats to a great extent as they would be treated to-day, except that the fourth syllogism is of course ignored. Under the heading of "Dilemmas" he gives the well-known story of Protagoras and Euathlus. He inserts a good deal of *prolegomena* material, and though Bacon's *Novum Organum* had not yet come to its own, there are useful and interesting hints upon what is now technically called "Inductive Logic." The *Institutes* were published in some form at Saumur in 1612, with a dedication to Du Plessy-Mornay; and later editions followed.¹

Duncan defines Logic as a "normative discipline of the mind, for use in acquiring and communicating the knowledge of a given object." Here there is an honest effort to assign Logic a place in relation to Philosophy in general. The Stoicks and Platonists made the former an integral part of the latter. The Aristotelians excluded Logic from the strict domain of Philosophy, because it gave no rules for behaviour, and provided no real cognition of an object. Yet they recognised it as closely subsidiary to Philosophy; in other words, as an instrument (*organon*) used by Philosophy. Thus far, then, Duncan grounds his definition on Aristotle and certain, perhaps not all, of Aristotle's followers. There is however a question which Aristotle seems never to have put, viz., whether Logic is a Science or an Art? Briefly, Duncan maintains what is now generally held regarding "Formal Logic," that it is Science as well as Art. It has to do both with correct thinking, and with the rules for expressing thoughts. Perhaps thus much on this point is sufficient for the scope of this paper.

Under the heading of "Induction," he has little to say. Knowledge was still analytic rather than synthetic. The chief "organon" of modern science was as yet hidden even from men of Duncan's wide scholarship. He declares perfect induction to be an argument from particular to universal through an enumeration of all particulars. For use in "imperfect" induction you cannot, he teaches, get a universal to use in syllogistic form, since it consists of an argument "from a few particulars." From one example, nothing general can be inferred—he will have no *ex uno discere omnes*! Obviously something is dimly foreshadowed in the above, but that is all we can say.

¹ There certainly were posthumous editions of 1643, and 1655, the latter bearing the title, *Institutiones Logicae: Libri quinque in usum Academiae Salmurensis quartum editi ut erant ab auctore recogniti*; Salmurii, MDCLV.

He reaches towards something further, however, (1) in his treatment of Causality, (2) under the Category of Action, and (3) under the Predicables. Real cause he claims is efficient cause, "that by which a thing is"—*causa a qua res*. And here he drags in an illustration from Medicine which shows that the meaning of causal connection, and its value for induction were present in his mind. Doctors, he says, recognise in that science (A) primitive, (B) intermediate and (C) direct or proximate causes; as—in the case of a fever—(a) chill, (b) constriction of the skin and (c) inflammation. Such an account of causality lacks in modern completeness, but it proves that Duncan had his feet on solid earth, and was able to bring to bear on the conditions of correct thinking those truths he could gather from his own medical experience. He was an Aristotelian, but he was not afraid to exercise independence of judgment; and his *Logic* marks a period when men were beginning to be ready for Bacon and other modern teachers.¹

On the whole Duncan must have found his billet at Saumur a pleasant one, especially in the earlier years of his career when the Academy was at its zenith. After the retirement of Du Plessy in 1620, the general decline of the Protestant cause throughout France set in, and Saumur in its own way suffered. A gallant stand was made by the Church at various Synods to keep its colleges in being, but the story of their rise and fall cannot be told in this paper. We may, however, add that Saumur was finally closed by royal edict on January 8, 1685. Its Rector and Professors were ordered to leave, and forbidden under penalties to teach any language or science in public or private.²

III

Duncan's medical knowledge and skill, viewed in the light of the times, must have been considerable.³ James I of England urged him to leave the banks of the Loire and come to London as his physician-in-ordinary, but this he declined to do. His clientèle included numbers of the highest rank around Anjou, some well-known even at Court such as the Maréchale de Brézé.

It was really in his capacity of physician that Mark Duncan stepped suddenly into the limelight in an unprecedented way. He was drawn into a *cause célèbre*, which created a great stir in 1632, and involved a series of events amid which he took grave risks in the cause of truth. The story of the "Possession of the Ursuline Nuns of Loudun" partakes of the nature of tragi-comedy. Tragical it certainly is because one of the

¹ Cf. *La philosophie à l' Académie Protestante de Saumur*, by Joseph Prost, D ès L., chap. II.

² Dumont: *Hist. l' Académie Saumur*.

³ Bourchenin suggests that he may have studied Medicine in the Low Countries.

persons implicated—the Canon of Loudun, a corrupt priest—was convicted of witchcraft and burnt at the stake. The story can be told in brief. About the year 1632 the whole countryside near Saumur was tse on edge by rumours that the Evil Spirit had taken possession of an entire convent in the adjacent town of Loudun. The nuns were acting in an extraordinary manner—exhibiting stigmas, and becoming subject to trances and convulsions. Suddenly they went so far as to develop an uncanny knowledge of (kitchen) Latin! The Devil, as Duncan pointed out, was neither a Hebrew nor a Greek scholar, since his victims never attempted these tongues. They further tried their hand at “thought-reading,” and professed to reveal people’s dark secrets, sometimes managing to hit the mark, though usually guessing wrong. Soon these wonders became the talk of the district and speculation began to spread far and wide. “Persons of quality” would call at the convent to watch the nuns. The Duchesse d’Aiguillon, a great lady in her day, used to order her coach, and go of an afternoon to see what they might be doing next.¹ The clergy started long meetings for exorcism “all over the place.” The convent became overcrowded, and the scandal still continued. Then Duncan entered the arena. Cardinal Richelieu had ordered an enquiry to be carried out by the Bishop and kindred authorities, but these all stood for the “Devil” theory, no doubt “to suit some private ends.” Duncan boldly attacked the whole imposture. He published a pamphlet in which he argued point by point against the idea of witchcraft. The nuns, he held, were victims of the mode of living to which they had been subjected; isolation and morbid imaginings had produced the “fixed idea” that the Devil was in it. As the physician summed it up: *Quaedam facta, a morbo multa, a daemonio nulla*; or in Dr. Bourchenin’s words: “A certain amount of deception, some physiological disturbances, but of ‘possession’ nothing at all.”²

The immediate result of Duncan’s pamphlet was a furious counterblast inspired by the great Cardinal and his entourage. A Loudun physician attempted, in a futile and unconvincing reply, to refute the Saumur authority.³ The hue and cry, however, grew louder, and Duncan’s safety was threatened. He was very near arrest, and there is no knowing what would have happened had he not had potent sympathisers on his side—the Duc de la Milleraye, who afterwards wrote a clever *Defense* of his physician and friend, and the famous Maréchale de Brézé, who also used

¹ Angers: *Mémoires de la Société d’Agriculture, Arts et Sciences*, VII; Elie Benoit, Bks. I, II.

² *Discours de la Possession des Ursulines de Loudun*; Paris, 1634. This rare pamphlet was discovered by Bourchenin in the Bibliothèque Nationale; he has very kindly indicated the gist of its contents to the writer.

³ Ménardiére: *Examen et Discussion critique de l’histoire des Diables de Loudun*.

to consult him on matters of health, and who brought powerful political influence to his aid. At length the storm abated, the limelight faded, and Duncan resumed the even tenor of his way in the pleasant academic groves of Saumur.

In the world of philosophic studies the star of the Cartesian glamour was slowly rising. Mark Duncan was among the last of those honoured masters who expounded to their generation the principles of Aristotelian philosophy. It may be stretching a point to say that the Scot saw, "in his mind's eye," the trend of things to come.¹ Nor is there any evidence that he took part in the fierce religious controversies which raged around him within Saumur. His colleagues, Gomar, Cameron, the Cappels, and later the famous Amyraut, belonged to the group of those heralds of revolt who strove to lift the thought of their time out of the narrower channels of Calvinism. Duncan's share was quietly to train minds to face these burning questions. Some would say he chose the better part.

Two estimates of his character and work are specially worth quoting, the first Scottish and the second French. The learned Thomas Dempster, who was himself Maître de Philosophie at Montpellier from 1605, wrote in 1627 as follows:—"Setting his mind to serious studies, he has found his home among the French as a teacher of philosophy, winning very great renown and many hearers. . . . He still lives as Professor of Philosophy at Saumur, where he continues to reflect credit on his nation, and to receive (so I hear) rich rewards for himself; which I do not so much believe, as desire, with all my heart, since there is nothing that so charming a man of genius does not deserve."² The French appreciation is from the article "Duncan" in Bayle's *Dictionnaire*:—"Il mourut l'an 1640 regretté de tout le monde, tant catholiques que réformés, de quelque qualité qu'ils fussent. Il possérait admirablement la philosophie, la théologie et les mathématiques, outre la médecine qu'il exerçait avec beaucoup d'honneur. Ce qui est le plus estimable, c'est qu'il était un homme d'une grande probité et d'une vie exemplaire."³

¹ Descartes was born in 1596, and his influence was being definitely felt in the fourth decade of his life.

² Thomas Dempster: *Hist. Eccles. Gentis Scotorum*, Edinburgh, 1829, I, 239.

³ "He died in the year 1640, regretted by every one of whatever rank, and whether Catholic or Protestant. He had a wide knowledge of Philosophy, Theology and Mathematics, as well as Medicine which he practised with great prestige. What is finest of all, he was a man of exemplary life and great probity." (translated).

Dempster mentions that Duncan wrote one book called *In Ethicam Synopsin*, besides a volume of *Poemata Varia*, and one of *Orationes*, as well as the *Logic*. There is, also, a curious pamphlet in the Bibl. Nat. arraigning the King of France, who, having been a Protestant, thought the Crown of France was "worth a mass," and abjured the Reformed faith. It is entitled:—*Henrici IV, Galliae et Navarrai regis christianissimi foedissimo . . . parricidio patriae erepti, justa qualia ei in acerbissimo luctu reddere potuit Marcus Duncanus (de Cerisantes). Ad reginam.*

Salmurii, 1610. Céristantes was an estate belonging to him: his eldest son bore the same name.

Duncan had three sons. 1. Céristantes; clever, vain, highly educated, inclined to be scatterbrained. He studied medicine at Montpellier; subsequently joined the army; went to Constantinople under Richelieu; served in Sweden, being recommended to Oxenstierna by Grotius; was afterwards in Poland and Russia; then in Rome, where he became a Roman Catholic. He died at Naples in 1648, during the siege. 2. François; died in London. 3. Jean; died quite young, in Saumur. The "Maison de Mark Duncan" existed in Saumur up to 1893, and there is still a street called after him there.

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